



GENDER ALERT ON THE CONFLICT IN SOUTH LEBANON

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Photo: UN Women Lebanon

CONTEXT

Since 8 October 2023, the spillover effects of the exchange of fire at the Lebanese southern border has led to killing and injuring of civilians in the south of Lebanon, including women, children, and media personnel and the internal displacement of 58,835 residents (52% female) from South Lebanon (as of 9 December 2023).¹ Lebanon currently shelters 991 internally displaced individuals across 14 collective shelters (in Sour, five collective shelters accommodate 696 IDPs; in Hasbaya, seven collective shelters house 136 IDPs, while in Kfar Denis, a single collective shelter hosts 46 IDPs and in Saida there is one collective shelter hosting 113 IDPs).² To shed light on how women have been affected by the conflict, and their ability to assist in local crisis response, UN Women Lebanon, International Alert, Kafa Enough Violence and Exploitation, and the Professional Mediation Centre at Saint Joseph University of Beirut have partnered to provide this Gender Alert amid the ongoing security and humanitarian crisis in South Lebanon. The findings provide observations on relevant gender equality issues to help UN Women and the humanitarian community pinpoint crucial areas of humanitarian response to incorporate into emergency preparedness and response planning.

¹OCHA (United Nations Office of Humanitarian Affairs). 2023. Lebanon Flash Update #4: Escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon. 9 December.

²IOM. (International Organization for Migration). 2023. Displacement Tracking Matrix: Mobility Snapshot – Round 15. 14 December.

According to consultations organized by UN Women and partners from 30 October to 10 November with 68 local women in South Lebanon engaged in local peacebuilding initiatives in six different locations (Marjayoun, Khayzaran, Ain el Helwe refugee camp, Hasbaya, Tyre (Sour) and Abbassiyeh), the conflict is having a variety of effects on the lives of women and girls. These include socioeconomic hardship, immense emotional distress, safety concerns and frustrations with inadequate support systems.³ Moreover, analysis of data from other UN humanitarian organizations point to additional gender-specific concerns. Women's rights organizations are getting involved, despite many challenges, and the consultations revealed the myriad ways in which local women are contributing by providing essential assistance and participating in local emergency coordination and planning. Notably, women are engaged in crisis management, registering with relief organizations, and addressing the specific needs of the displaced, while working with the municipalities to find available shelter.

ISSUES FOR ATTENTION

1. Women and girls are suffering mental health effects amid the current crisis.

- Women reported overwhelming levels of stress, frustration and confusion amid the current violence and hostilities. Women are suffering from anxiety due to the sounds of nearby shelling, bombs and explosions. Some report feeling unsafe going outside. For some, this is bringing back traumatic memories of past conflicts, such as the 2006 war and the Lebanese civil war.
- Some women noted the heavy burden of emotionally supporting and comforting their family, particularly children and grandchildren, amid the heightened fear and vulnerability.
- Consultations with the Protection Working Group revealed that children are being displaced with individuals other than their immediate family members, sometimes traveling with another relative or adult, leading to secondary internal displacement and emotional distress for the separated children.
- Some women also reported having to constantly control and conceal their emotions to avoid increasing fear within their families.
- Consulted women in some communities reported feeling abandoned and an intense sense of despair due to the unpredictable nature of conflicts and the financial pressures of daily life, which have taken a toll.
- Women with family members in the military face heightened stress due to the need to travel to more unstable areas and the heightened fear for the life and safety of their family members.
- Some women are constantly moving back and forth between their homes in the South and Beirut out of fear of escalating conflicts, which has disrupted their daily lives and had significant impacts on their children.

2. Crises affect women disproportionately, leaving them more susceptible to socioeconomic impacts.

- The odds were already stacked against women in Lebanon, particularly amid the economic downturn since 2019. Approximately 20% of Lebanese households are headed by women, and female-headed households have higher rates of multidimensional poverty compared to those headed by men (56.7% vs. 52.6%).⁴ Lebanese women are far more likely than men to be unemployed (33% versus 27% as of 2022).⁵ Female labour force participation in Lebanon dropped from 27% in 2018 to 22% in 2022, in sharp contrast with the 67% male labour force participation rate in 2022.⁶

³ UN Women Lebanon, International Alert, KAFA, Professional Mediation Centre of the Saint Joseph University of Beirut. 2023. Gender Alert: Report on the current situation of women living in the South of Lebanon. November..

⁴ UN Women and the Gender Working Group in Lebanon. 2023. [Gender Statistical Profile: Lebanon](#). June. p. 7; World Bank and CAS. 2022. [Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index, p.4](#).

⁵ Central Administration of Statistics (CAS) and International Labour Organization (ILO) data for 2022, as cited by UN Women and the Gender Working Group in Lebanon. 2023. [Gender Statistical Profile: Lebanon](#). June. p. 7.

⁶ Ibid. p. 6.

Discriminatory social norms also negatively affect women's access to inheritance, financial, banking and digital services. Yet the gap between the economic autonomy of men and women is even more pronounced in times of crisis, as women are often the first to lose their jobs, eat less and take up additional unpaid care and domestic work. Women also remain a minority of those benefiting from employment and productive livelihood opportunities.

- Women from Marjayoun, in the Nabatieh Governorate, said they worry about going to work due to the risk of being hit by missiles on the way. Women from Hasbaya reported that their men are grappling with unemployment because of the conflict in the South, leading to a significant decline in household income. Women reported widespread unemployment as the olive season is often the sole source of income and many olive groves have been destroyed by Israeli shelling. This precarious situation has left many, and women in particular, living in constant apprehension about the uncertainties that lie ahead.

- Several women from Khayzaran reported taking in relatives that had to leave their homes due to the ongoing hostilities, which has added an additional economic burden on their families. Women in Hasbaya said hosting displaced relatives has meant sharing their food with more people, meaning smaller portions for everyone.

- In Hasbaya, the situation has forced the closure of schools, shops and institutions, while essential supplies and medicines have begun to run low, causing significant price increases.

- Consultations with the Protection Working Group revealed that financial strain and livelihood losses hinder people from leaving affected areas, especially impacting refugees, while instances of family separation are increasing, as women and children relocate while men stay behind to protect property vulnerable to demolition. Furthermore, landlords in areas that are considered safe are reportedly taking advantage of displaced families by demanding exorbitant rents, raising concerns among communities and there is a growing fear that existing tenants might be evicted to accommodate displaced families, allowing landlords to charge higher rates.

3. Women and girls may face increased risks of gender-based violence (GBV).

- Before the crisis in 2019, 31% of married Lebanese women were already experiencing at least one form of intimate partner violence, and gender-based violence is known to increase during crises.⁷

- Other GBV-related protection issues that predated the crisis included the phenomenon of “missing women and girls”, as incidents of human trafficking into/across Lebanon have been increasing since 2021,⁸ with women and girls, especially migrants and refugees, most likely to be the victims.⁹ At least 50 femicides were investigated by the Internal Security Forces in 2021 and 2022.¹⁰ And vulnerable populations receiving humanitarian assistance, particularly refugees, are also increasingly concerned about kidnapping, with 1 in 7 Palestinian refugee households, and 1 in 10 Syrian refugee households reporting the kidnapping of girls as a safety concern.¹¹

- Consultations with the Protection Working Group revealed that amid the current household displacement, families grappling with related stresses, such as financial difficulties and restricted privacy, experience heightened risks of gender-based violence. This increased vulnerability particularly affects current GBV survivors, and there is a risk of a rise in negative coping strategies, like child labour and child marriage, among those affected.

⁷ UN Women and Promundo. 2018. [Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey \(IMAGES\) in Lebanon.](#)

⁸ Simpson, Solomon. Borgen Project. 2021. Human Trafficking in Lebanon.

⁹ Observations from Kafa's Anti-Trafficking and Exploitation Unit, as cited in UN Women. 2023. [Gender Alert on Missing Women and Girls in Lebanon' Humanitarian Crisis: What We Know So Far.](#) March.

¹⁰ Data provided by ISF to UN Women Lebanon in February 2023, as cited in UN Women 2023 Gender Alert on Missing Women.

¹¹ REACH. 2023. [Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment: Migrant Households in Lebanon;](#) UNHCR et al. 2023. [Preliminary Results of the Vulnerability Assessment for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon,](#) as cited in UN Women 2023 Gender Alert on Missing Women and Girls.

- Humanitarian actors have raised concerns that although referrals to protection partners are increasing, reports of gender-based violence are worryingly below pre-crisis levels.¹²
- According to Kafa the case management and assessment of GBV cases in the South is now being held online instead of in person. There was no remarkable increase in the number of GBV cases, but reported incidents are more aggressive and extreme since the conflict started. Legal procedures have been paused since legal institutions are closed in the South. Currently there is no women shelters in the South, so Kafa is referring women and children in need to shelters in Beirut, adding that transportation possibilities are limited due to the current situation.
- Dedicated safe spaces inside collective shelters are needed. The need for better monitoring of collective shelters and the lack of female security personnel, are also ongoing concerns requiring coordinated efforts.¹³
- The identification of protection needs and outreach to displaced women outside collective shelters remains a challenge with only a few actors focusing on such service-provision. To enhance the response, greater collaboration with municipalities is needed to ensure wider access.¹⁴
- Furthermore, consulted women discussed the need to provide dignity kits with menstrual supplies to displaced women. UN reports also cite the need for reproductive health services and sanitary items, requiring a systematic and coordinated approach to needs assessments and distribution.¹⁵

4. Specific groups of women, such as migrants, are more vulnerable and at-risk.

- Women often lack autonomy in relocation decisions, due to dependency on male heads of households. Consultations with the Protection Working Group reveal that Syrian women fear being unable to return to their homes and face pressure to stay. Furthermore, certain migrants, such as foreign domestic workers and labourers, report being left behind or confined in unsafe areas by relocating employers.
- Moreover, women and girls in the Ain el Helwe Palestinian refugee camp report deeper levels of anxiety, insecurity and anger following the recent clashes inside the camp that lasted 3 months over the summer, only to be followed by the ongoing conflict on Lebanon's southern border and in Gaza.

¹² OCHA. 2023. Lebanon Flash Update #1: Escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon. 18 November. p. 5.

¹³ OCHA. 2023. Lebanon Flash Update #3: Escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon. 1 December. p. 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁵ OCHA. 2023. Lebanon Flash Update #1: Escalation of hostilities in South Lebanon. 18 November. p. 5.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government of Lebanon

- Promote gender equality and women's participation in the security sector, as this is critical to building accountable, inclusive and responsive institutions.
- Scale up the development of plans for a potential escalation of conflict occasioning further relocation, with particular attention to the specific needs and safety of women and children.
- Continue to support inclusive rule of law institutions and to advance women's access to justice.
- Strengthen collaboration with women-led civil society organizations, especially those working on protection and GBV services in order to share information, make referrals and follow up on cases.

Humanitarian Responders, Coordination and Stakeholders

- Provide mental health and psychosocial support for women and children in need, especially those directly impacted by the conflict in the South and treat unhealed war-related trauma, which runs deep and has the potential to resurface with every conflict trigger.
- Collect and disseminate relevant gender, age and disability disaggregated data across all response sectors and lead joint advocacy on gender sensitivity in the humanitarian response.¹⁶
- Develop plans to prepare for a potential escalation of conflict, ensuring that communities are well-prepared to respond effectively to the needs of women and children in particular.
- Amplify women's voices and leadership in humanitarian and crisis response and leverage local knowledge and expertise.
- Provide financial assistance for women who've lost their source of income as a result of the conflict/displacement and to families hosting IDPs.

Protection and GBV Service Providers

- Strengthen comprehensive protection and livelihoods support to crisis-affected women and girls along the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.
- Establish safe spaces inside collective shelters for women and children in need as well as dedicated women shelters in the South.
- Provide site managers and emerging actors with tailored trainings on protection principles, paying attention to sex, age and disability, as well as on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, gender-based violence and psychological first aid.
- Advocate and raise awareness to affected communities on the importance of reporting cases of GBV to help address underreporting and ensure documentation.

¹⁶ Women's groups from Hasbaya have discussed the possibility of drafting an open letter condemning the ongoing violence, and other efforts to promote joint advocacy for peace.